

Women in power

On August 9 1956, thousands of women marched to the apartheid government's Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against pass laws. Now, more than 40 years later, women are part of the new government. Does this mean the struggle for women's rights is over? Will women in parliament continue fighting for women's voices to be heard?



When State President Nelson Mandela opened parliament, he promised women that the government would address their needs. "The objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme will not have been realised unless we see in practical terms the condition of women in South Africa changing for the better, and that they have the power to intervene in all aspects of life as equals," Mandela said.

He also said a gender commission would be formed and plans for affirmative action programmes for women in all government departments would be put in place.

Although the President has come out strongly in support for women's rights, the higher structures of government remain male-dominated.

There are only two women in the 30-member

cabinet — Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (Minister of Health) and Stella Sigcau (Minister of Public Enterprises). There are three women Deputy Ministers — Winnie Mandela (Arts, Culture, Science and Technology), Thoko Msane (Agriculture) and Sanki Nkondo (Welfare and Population Development).

The premiers in all nine regions are men and, of the 90 senators, only 16 are women.

In parliament, however, the picture is different. Our new parliament now has 106 women out of 400 MPs. South Africa has shifted from number 141 on the list of countries with women in government to number seven.

It is also encouraging that Frene Ginwala was appointed speaker of parliament — the first woman to hold this position.

Already, it has been said that parliamentarians are careful about the language they use.

Stella Sigcau, Minister of Public Enterprises



SPEAK: Do you see the economic empowerment of women as important?

The econom-

ic empowerment of women is a priority. In my department, there are very

few women on the board of directors and a lot needs to be done to change this. All government and semi-government enterprises are starting affirmative action training programmes. I'm going to make sure there are a fair number of women, from both rural and urban areas, in these programmes.

There will also be marketing and management training for women living in rural areas.

This training will have to go hand in hand with providing people with resources to

improve their lives, such as electricity, water, etc. Let the burden of women looking for wood be cut.

The mistake in the past was to teach women skills without having a market for their products.

Women's organisations will play an important role in putting women forward for training.

SPEAK: What does August 9 mean to you?

It is a day we celebrate the valuable role women have played in our struggle. This year, National

Women's Day must be a huge celebration and must be used by women to discuss the role they are going to play in building our country.

SPEAK: Do you have a message for our readers?

Women are a powerful force in South Africa and, in knowing that, women can help make our country a better place to live in.

Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Minister of Health



SPEAK: How did you feel when you were appointed?

At first I was shocked, it was completely unexpected.

It is a very big responsibility that rests on my shoulders. But I am excited, particularly because the important role women played in the struggle was recognised.

It is a challenge that must be tackled in a collective way.

SPEAK: You have already made health care free for pregnant women and young children. Will free health care be made available for other things like pap smears and check-ups for breast cancer?

The National Family Planning Programme provides free services to all women. Women using contraceptives are given a full medical examination every year — which includes examination of the breasts.

Pap smears will only be taken in high risk cases. Because it is not financially possible, a



The historic women's march on the Union Buildings in 1956

national screening programme for all women in South Africa is not in place.

Thoko Msane, Deputy Minister of Agriculture



SPEAK: Did your appointment come as a surprise to you?

Yes, it did. When I heard

about it, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I felt happy and proud to be representing women, on the other hand, I saw it as a challenge.

SPEAK: Do you plan to involve women more in agricultural planning?

Women are already involved in agriculture. The most important thing is the lack of services in rural areas. We need a joint approach to deal with this.

SPEAK: Do you have a message for our readers?

My appointment should not be seen as an individual thing. If it is to mean anything, women on the ground must get involved. After all, small-scale farmers mainly come from the rural areas and most are women.

Agriculture is an economic tool to help build the economy of the country.

Younger women must look at agriculture as a subject to study at tertiary level.

Sanki Nkondo, Deputy Minister of Welfare and Population Development



SPEAK: What will you do to help women who battle to get maintenance for their children?



“National Women’s Day must be a huge celebration and must be used by women to discuss the role they are going to play in building our country... Women are a powerful force and they can help make our country a better place to live” - Stella Sigcau

Claiming child support is not the only problem single mothers face. They have to pay high taxes, which is not fair. This and improving the system of claiming maintenance are areas I consider as a priority.

Joyce Kgoali, Senator



SPEAK: What does it mean to be a senator? It is challenging. One has to deal with men who seem to

be hardline about women’s issues. I am a member of the rules committee which sets the code of conduct for the senate. We are only two women out of 15 on this committee. We end up being the watchdogs of women’s issues, although men are coming into tune.

SPEAK: What do you promise to do for women? It is important that there are

women’s structures outside parliament to support what is happening inside parliament.

Without any support from outside, it is pointless. Women parliamentarians must be part of these structures. During breaks in parliament, women must go back and account to these structures. As a trade unionist, I will not forget about women workers and I will go back to the gender committees in the unions.

Kgoali’s message to SPEAK readers is:

On August 9, we need to wave the flag of women’s struggles. Women’s issues must be celebrated in a way that is recognised world wide. National Women’s Day events need to be attended by all and celebrations must take place throughout the country.

Phumzile Ngcuka, Member of Parliament



SPEAK: Why did ANC women MP’s form a women’s caucus? Women played a central role in

bringing the ANC into power. Therefore more women should

have been considered for cabinet and deputy cabinet positions. It cannot be argued that there is a shortage of women leaders.

We believe there is a need for a forum which will make sure the interests of women, both inside and outside parliament, are considered. The women’s caucus consists only of ANC women, but we plan to draw in women from other parties.

SPEAK: Are you planning to draw men into the caucus?

Men haven’t shown much interest but this has a lot to do with everyone being busy.

SPEAK: Where to from here?

There is still a lot of work to be done. As long as we feel we are not recognised as equals in society, the struggle will never end. We must not allow the gains women have made in government to determine the pace of our struggle.

Winnie Mandela, Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology

We tried to get comment from Deputy Minister Winnie Mandela. At the time that we went to printers we hadn’t received her answers to the questions. ❄